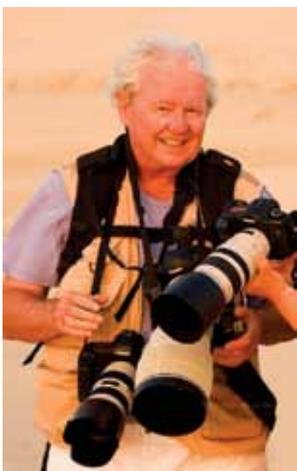


Pre-Visualizing & Vision

THE ELUSIVE FRIENDS OF PHOTOGRAPHERS

"It might help to have a name for the problem"

Nina Allen Freeman



By Denis Glennon

Ever since primal "chisel" was taken to slate, the impacts of words have influenced universal thought and on occasions, have changed the course of history. The words in the Magna Carta, the Koran, the New Testament, Oliver Twist, Shakespeare, Rhumi and many others, confirm the point. Words in speeches can uplift, in editorials persuade and in poems inspire.

Art and sculpture with their own special poetry have too stimulated new attitudes and stirred hearts through the millennia.

Can photography, whose content is limited to that in the frame, perform similarly? Can this more modern art form transform human thought and action?

Who can forget the eyes of the young Afgan girl in Steve McCurry's photograph on the cover of National Geographic, or the haunting poignancy of the gaze in Anne Frank's



Misty morning

portrait, or Stuart Franklin's photograph of the lone man standing with his meager shopping bags in front of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square, or Nick Ut's image of the little South Vietnamese girl, burnt by napalm, running naked into his lens?

What sorts of feelings grasped these photographers' hearts as they made such insightful, thought provoking and emotionally stirring images – sadness, sorrow, joy, awe, shocking numbness, anger, despair, sheer delight, uncertainty?

Such photographs come veiled in a kind of mystery. When we absorb the intrinsic message in them, our sense of wonder and newfound insight come together like two lips touching. To execute such photographs, the index finger and a distinctive vision only by that photographer joined forces, for a split second.

This distinctive vision is the veil in which great photographs come cloaked. Once the veil is unfolded and the message inherent in the photograph filters into our eyes, our head, our heart and our soul, we are changed, as a person.

When the creation of such vision is central to our framing of a subject, it takes our photographs beyond just common-place images.

It is the continual search for this elusive element that moves us to reach for our cameras. It determines what we look for and what we see in the frame. It determines what we photograph, and why. Without it, as photographers, we languish.

Helen Keller said "It is a terrible thing to see and have no vision". Is there a difference between the term "pre-visualization" as used by photographers, and Helen Keller's "vision"?

I find it convenient to think of "pre-visualizing" as the thought process I work through to arrive at the distinctive "vision" I desire to depict. I can then press the camera shutter.

Pre-visualizing is not just seeing; it is not just "using sight". It is my seeking and finding that unique, artistic interpretation of the subject that others looking at the same subject do not see. How come? It is because this very personal construal of the subject does not have a



Tranquil waters

physical reality. It is what I see in my mind's eye; it comes only from within me. It is abstract. It is intangible, but when I recognise it, I select it and pray it will come to life in my photograph.

I may not be able to easily articulate what it is, but when I see it, in print, or on screen, I recognise it, in an instant. It is the unmistakable element in a photograph that evokes emotion but is otherwise invisible. This invisible element is the "vision" I emotionally experience and feel, and desire to share, a split second before I press the shutter.

From this perspective, "pre-visualizing" is the seeking and finding, of that elusive, yet personally felt, invisible element. "Vision" then, is that intrinsic element; that partially veiled, intangible quality that causes the viewer

to stop, take a second look, gaze and feel the same emotional impact that is a living part of the photograph.

How many hundreds, perhaps thousands of the images sitting in our hard drives, contain this kind of vision?

How many times have we pressed the shutter without even thinking about the vision we might have imbedded in the image?

Pre-visualizing is a constantly challenging artistic endeavour. I have learned the endeavour is a journey, not a destination.

I do not always have an instantaneous vision of the potential impact of every subject. At times, my camera becomes not the means to portray vision; it becomes the means to help illuminate it. Simply looking through the frame and excluding some element whilst including another, frequently brings disarray into order, and complexity into simplicity. The frame itself helps bring vision to the surface.

I learned and adopted this approach from the writings of David duChemin, Adrian Briot and Joe McNally; three outstanding photographers. The frame is my friend in the work of pre-visualizing. I have a symbiosis, not so much with my camera, but with its frame.

David duChemin contends, despite all the technological advances to photography, it is the frame that remains the one constant. How true.

Can the faculty to pre-visualize, see in my mind's eye, unveil the invisible, be made sharper, and brought into greater clarity. The answer is, yes.



Golden eventide

Infrequently vision finds me; but mostly I have to practice it. For this, I find solitude and nature help. Others photographers will find friends in different settings.

Solitude

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

Marcel Proust

Solitude in cities can sometimes be elusive. The minutia of suburbia, entwine me wherever I look. The sensate immediacy of cityscapes, my own restiveness, desire for companionship, and need for busyness, repeatedly tempt me to flee solitude as soon as I sense it, in these surroundings.

Here my reluctance for solitude proves as strong as my yearning for it. Another place is needed. Beyond the city, away from business babble, I find a quieter contentment, a place where I can reflect in solitude; where vision can gently reveal itself. Reflecting on how to develop the faculty of pre-visualizing is just as important as creating more images. An important part of this work takes place when I do not have a camera. Just shooting and printing new images will not add to a better unveiling of the invisible.

Away from cityscapes, solitude, with its perfectly innocent, lyrical language, its own “lingua incognita”, speaks its awakening to vision.

Here, I come closer to knowing the truth about the nature of things and of self. Here, clear of clamor, filled with silence, is a hallowed space to practice “seeing with new eyes”. It invites me to let go, and not lean on the support of other photographers’ acclaim, technique, style or stories.

It is a space and time where the outer quietude gradually prevails over the inner restiveness, and leads to a private stillness, and a more revered viewing through my camera’s frame. A growing trust is discovered; a trust that unties me from the influence of other photographers’ style, and crafts my own.

Being at one with solitude, gently tests if there is something inside that can stand on its own. It compels me to test if the visions are mine and mine only. An allegiance to and mastery of, this work, I think is what reveals the personal style or signature of individual photographers.

To be alone with my camera’s frame, is as close as I come to a surrendering of the authenticity of my being,



Tranquility in gold.

to better discern that invisible element and integrate it into as many of my images, as possible. In developing this discernment, nature also helps.

Nature’s Gifts

“One painter ought never to imitate of another; because in that case he cannot be called the child of nature, but the grandchild. It is always best to have recourse to nature, which is replete with such abundance of objects, than to the production of other masters, who learn everything from her”.

Leonardo Da Vinci

Sunsets are always striking to photograph. However, sunrises offer more lingering, sacred opportunities. Here, it is possible to pre-visualize great hope and the singular delight of being in unity with the miracle of a new day.

Sunrise speaks the language of silence, the very idiom of images. There is obligation to acknowledge and to feel its stillness. The solemn silence into which the radiance of sun emerges as it flows freely, with



Swallowtail Bee-eaters



Landscape organ

inexpressible humility, into my frame, fills me with feelings of awe, respect, and blessedness. The sun's richness of colour, immense presence and newness, evoke wonder and delight. As a spectator at "le point vierge" of dawn, I witness the rebirth of our earth, where sunrise seems to seek permission, simply to be. My mind's eye, my body and soul resonate. A myriad of evocative visions are revealed, kindly, freely.

Seascapes

The waves in a dawn seascape can be persistence, perpetual, ever majestic as they march from night's dark shadows to salute the shimmering spectre of day. Is this the vision I wish to portray? Their constancy teaches me to be patient with framing and wait, as sunrise's enormous yolk of energy spreads to take over the day, its early light falls softly. It appears to glow not on the sea but from within it, bringing out its shy strength. Should I now press the shutter?

I am obliged to slow down my photography. I, in turn, enter into a slower rhythm.

Dawn seascapes can portray the power of wind on wave. These waves are vibrant, ever changing – a theatre of fluency that delights my photographer's eye, as if during the darkness, an omnipotent, surrealistic Artist laid down the entire powerful panorama, in preparation for me and my camera. Visions continue to be unveiled, in abundance.

Noon-time swells, with their gentle steadiness and visible, yet distant, origin, and their cerulean reflections, glisten in sparkling sunlight. It is kind to photograph these seas, to feel the warmth of the sun and come to know the rhythm of the waves, each searching to soothe my soul. Body and spirit loosen and come back to their natural cadence, to a state of mind apposite for this work.

Such photography disentangles my knotted mind. Once again, my mind's eye, indeed my being, is being tuned to experience the quiet rhythm, unclocking the gentleness felt in these noon-time temperate seas; the poetry of good images.

Perhaps, there is a sacred idleness in this genus of solitary photography?

Moonlight seascapes offer different, sometimes more complex kinds of vision. Sometimes there can be a frightening grace in these hidden seas. They come in silence; save for the snarling of their crests. An unfamiliar sea, with its unleashed power and its difficult-to-frame surliness can reveal aloneness or fear.

As the moon drifts behind a black cloud, there is persuasion to feel alone and think of returning to a "safer" place. I have found it is a mistake to interfere with such feeling. There is a quality to photographing moonlit seascapes that is incredibly precious. There is a special welcome at the heart of this aloneness. It is wise to know it, and not seek to dismiss it too hurriedly. It holds enormous potency of mood that overflows my frame.

Like these rolling seas, aloneness and fear will soon be on their way elsewhere. They no longer escort, or disturb. In a gentle shifting flow of shadow, I come into rhythm with the sweet warmth of the now unnoticed sea, with the solitude, with the cadence of nature, and with my own self. The timeless breathing sound of sea restores my heart and heightens my photographer's sense of seeing. These visions are of a deeper, more profound kind.

Nightscapes

On calm, clear nights under a star-studded sky, being alone in nature is a profound experience that can be purifying, especially for landscape photographers. As I photograph nightscapes, I breathe at a pace that is in tune with the unhurried beat of the earth. Subjects are framed by a horizon and a celestial sphere upon which the stars appear fixed. Yet, I know the majestic constellations wheel in their patterns overhead. Here is akin to my camera's frame having its own private sky. The naked beauty is surpassed only by the pure space. With aloneness as sanctuary, the sky and stars awaken my deadened senses to the glorious preciousness of this universe. Which will I portray... celestial grandeur, wheeling constellations, the naked beauty of night sky, preciousness of planet earth, insignificance of man, silence?

Photographing such nightscapes does extraordinary things to my concept of the world. It is more than

merely capturing images – it is an extension of my mind into the heavens, and into the past. For a while I am a contemporary of long gone photographers, each in search of their own “terra repromissionis”. I craft a fleeting glimpse of Ansel Adams reflecting as he photographed in his beloved nature, yet, under the same sky. Perhaps a black and white image would be the most respectful?

Photographing nightscapes, in solitude, draws out reflective faculties and gifts time to let the mind drift to the spectacle above. It is a visible universe pricked by the white light of a trillion distant stars. How do I unveil a whispered prayer in this vast cathedral of silence and speckled light?

I can frame but one small part of this cosmos, just those few stars and galaxies, visible at precisely this time, on this night, and only from my present position; how unique. Perhaps, my own smallness, is appropriate?

This is how I journey; the destination is beyond the smallest star I see. It seems so distant.

Time in this splendour, is an illimitable succession of heartbeats that extend from the present into the past, and into the future. Remote from time-focused, city-linked impedimenta, I experience the timelessness of time, the constancy of frame, and momentarily that place of truth within me, which when I reach it, does not betray me.

I discover for myself the utterly simple prescription for creative vision; be intensely myself.

Friends Found

Photography of this kind slows my pace and births perceptible images and poetry; images pregnant with silence, the harmonious arrangement of elements in the images creating the poetry. I am part of an ancient exchange that has continued for more than a century,



Above: Solitude in colour

between four friends – my camera’s frame, solitude’s silence, nature’s poetry and Helen Keller’s vision.

All photographers are welcome in this world. We strive to bring out nature’s spirit. Like any friend, it is important to treat her mysterious ways with respect and curiosity.

Embraced by this companionship, I become more attentive to the craft of photography and to the unveiled mystery of its soul friend, vision. Since the first light of photography, an unbroken, whispered exchange between these friends has remained constant.

I no longer need express my vision through a rule of thirds, golden mean, hyperfocal distance, or even our choice of camera, lens, exposure, composition or the digital darkroom.

Senses awakened, I journey, I pause, I linger and when my own distinctive vision is ready to be painted, I press the shutter button.

In the company of my camera, I journey back, from whence I came, in tranquility, in a reverie of suspended thought, grateful for – frame, solitude, nature and vision.

Brief Notes on Denis Glennon AO

Denis combines his longstanding affections for sailing, travel, wildlife and nature preservation, with conservation photography.

He photographs to convey the intrinsic value of the natural world. His photography is not a portrayal of environmental vandalism or an elegy to vanishing places. He leaves that mission to other, equally ardent photographers.

Rather, his focus is on the use of imagery to encourage the preservation and enhancement of what is.

When he photographs wild creatures, he sees them in the frame as ambassadors, simply seeking the preservation of their frequently diminishing habitat.

The images he makes, seek to be beacons to a stronger connectedness with our natural world, and to inspire a more respectful interaction with our environment.

He would be rewarded if his images help others to embrace even a small part of their Earth again and he would be pleased to share with Better Digital Camera readers some of his practical techniques for enhancing visualization.

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